DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 058 191 TE 002 703

AUTHOR La Conte, Ronald
TITLE Some Opening Remarks: Addressed to the NEATE at Its Spring Conference in Auburn, Mass., May 1, 1971.
PUB DATE Sep 71
NOTE 12p.
JOURNAL CIT The Leaflet; v70 n3 p27-38 September 1971

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS *Curriculum Design; *Educational Problems; Elective Subjects; *English Curriculum; Individualized Instruction; Language Arts; Relevance (Education); Student Participation; *Student Rights; *Teacher Education

ABSTRACT

In these opening remarks to conference attendees, problems faced by schools today, and in particular by English teachers, are recounted, and possible solutions are offered. These problems are: student disruption; school governance; student rights; relevance of curriculum; elective programs; student participation in course content selection; accountability concept; behavioral objectives; teacher preparation; and teacher surplus. Suggested solutions to these educational problems are: (1) make the curriculum more responsive to the individual student; (2) allow students to participate with teachers in designing an elective courses curriculum; (3) utilize the British Primary Education Plan, which focuses on language in use and the uses of language rather than classification and identification and accumulation of knowledge about; (4) move teacher preparation from college classrooms to school classrooms; and (5) utilize the teacher surplus to reduce class size, institute new programs, and develop new approaches. (DB)

ED058191

"PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS COPYRIGHTED MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
RONALD LA CONTE AND
"THE LEAFLET"
TO ERIC AND ORGANIZATIONS OPERATING UNDER AGREEMENTS WITH THE U.S. OFFICE OF EDUCATION. FURTHER REPRODUCTION OUTSIDE THE ERIC SYSTEM REQUIRES PERMISSION OF THE COPYRIGHT OWNER."

The Leaflet
Vol. 70, No. 3,
September 1971

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF HEALTH, EDUCATION & WELFARE
OFFICE OF EDUCATION

THIS DOCUMENT HAS BEEN REPRODUCED EXACTLY AS RECEIVED FROM THE PERSON OR ORGANIZATION ORIGINATING IT. POINTS OF VIEW OR OPINIONS STATED DO NOT NECESSARILY REPRESENT OFFICIAL OFFICE OF EDUCATION POSITION OR POLICY.

TE 002 703

SOME OPENING REMARKS

addressed to the NEATE at its spring conference in Auburn, Mass., May 1, 1971

BY RONALD LA CONTE

In the time-honored pattern of conference ritual it is my role to serve as high priest to the tribe; to invoke the spirits of our leaders — living and dead — to guide us; to employ the unique word-magic of our cult to promote group solidarity; and to recite the litany of our beliefs, sharpening your sense of purpose before sending you into battle.

To some extent I intend to fulfill that role. For one thing, it's fun to do. It's my turn on the soap box, and I might as well enjoy the opportunity while I've got it. For another thing, at nine in the morning a little polemic may have a useful rousing effect — although a second cup of coffee would probably do just as well.

Ronald La Conte is Assistant Professor of Education at the University of Connecticut.

But in addition to serving as head cheer leader at the pep rally, I'd also like to try to shed some light on these problems — mostly in the form of questions they raise — and to show how these six issues, far from being discrete and unrelated, bear closely on one another.

Undoubtedly, there are some of you who were disappointed when you saw the list of topics scheduled for discussion today. After all, most of these problems seem pretty far removed from the day-to-day concerns of English teachers, and isn't the point of attending a conference to pick up a few ideas on how to be a more effective teacher? Why waste time on such broad issues, problems that we probably can't do much about anyway? Why not spend these few hours dealing with something really important, like what grammar to teach?

However, let me suggest that when kids go at each other with knives and trays in the cafeteria or run through the halls smashing windows and overturning lockers, or when faculties divide in bitter disputes over the writing of behavioral objectives, or when school boards begin to demand more classes and larger classes per teacher, or when parents march on the school demanding to know what is being done for their kids, or when a private corporation moves into your school and begins telling you what and how to teach, or when your son or daughter leaves college with a degree and a teaching certificate and no prospect of a job, or when the very existence of your own job is threatened, your priorities and day-to-day concerns can change very quickly. And even if you have not yet been caught up in a situation as drastic as these, I would further suggest that the same forces that produce such situations are already influencing your professional life and your effectiveness as a teacher, whether you are aware of it or not.

For a start, let's look at the problem of student disruption. This is a rather broad term covering a wide variety of student behavior not all of the same nature or stemming from the same causes. But however we define it, one thing is obvious, there is a lot more student agitation than there used to be, even a few years ago, and there's probably going to be even more in the near future. Of course, the kind that grabs the headlines is the violent kind. I'll bow to Mr. Agnew on this one. Violence in schools does make good copy, and the media are quick to pounce on it. Because most of the violent incidents tend to occur in city schools and involve minority groups or stem from racial conflicts, many people have come to think of violent disturbances as just another urban problem,

another of those nasty things that go on in the cities. But our experience on college campuses has shown us that violence is not beyond those same nice, white, middle class kids who a year or so ago were sitting in suburban high schools. And, if they're doing everything else earlier, how much longer before these kids start tearing up the school a couple of years sooner? Suburban and rural schools are already reporting a sharp increase in the incidence of vandalism.

The point is not that violence is necessary, or even inevitable, but that it is the natural consequence of increased hostility. And anyone who kids himself by believing "it can't happen in my school" is heading for serious trouble.

But there are forms of disruption less noticeable and newsworthy than violent displays or even peaceful demonstrations. These are the more subtle forms, the passive forms of protest, which probably don't qualify as disruption at all because they don't disturb the routine of the school — except maybe through the conscience of a sensitive teacher or two. The drop-outs — physical and psychological — who simply say "to hell with it." The detached, the bored, the cynical, who merely walk through each school day waiting for its end. They disturb no one; they allow us to act out our teaching charade in peace; they accept our C's and D's and F's graciously, quietly; and they leave us having learned thoroughly the only lesson we've taught them — school is a meaningless bore.

As the briefing sheets you were given note, most of the tensions and conflicts in the schools are over the issues of school governance and individual rights. Junior and senior high school students all over the country are asking, more insistently and more loudly, "*Why* can't I?" Why can't I go to my locker between classes, drive a car to school, smoke a cigarette, leave the school grounds, walk the corridors without a pass, use the library when I wish, dress the way I like, put my arm around my girl, sleep a little later in the morning or go home a little earlier if you've got nothing better for me to do than sit in a study hall? Even more importantly, they are asking questions like, why do I have to learn this stuff? (An age-old query that we've never answered satisfactorily.) Or, why do you have the right to judge me if I have no right to judge you? What does failure mean anyway — who has failed, me or the teacher? Why can I study only certain things in school and not others? Why aren't the things I'm interested in important?

The search for answers to these questions, or more accurately for appropriate action — for the questions are largely rhetorical — does not always lead to confrontation and upheaval. More and more dissatisfied kids and teachers are employing the tactics of what Postman and Weingartner call in their new book *The Soft Revolution* A few incidents they cite will illustrate.

> Donald St. George Reeves, an eighteen year old senior in a New York High School got together with five other students and formed a group called the Student Rights Coalition. Its purpose is to press for adoption of a "Negotiated Bill of Student Rights." They have recruited about five thousand members mostly from schools with serious problems. Reeves wants to make student government something other than a big joke. Commenting on his success at organizing, Reeves was quoted as saying, "It's surprising how much you can get away with by wearing a jacket and tie."
>
> In Milwaukee about thirty students, most of them "successful", got fed up with the standard brand of schooling given them. So they stopped going and started their own school. Their school is based on the assumptions that all students have serious personal interests and that these interests should be the starting point for education.
>
> Robert Marks was twenty eight years old when he was "invited" not to return to the school where he had been teaching. Apparently Marks wasn't sufficiently interested in grading, tests, and the standard curriculum. Also, he and his students talked a great deal about "unauthorized" subjects. Marks didn't quite know what to do when he was let go. So he started his own school, which is now called The New Prospect Day School. In Marks' school, the teachers don't give grades or tests, and everyone talks all the time about "unauthorized" subjects. *

All over the country similar movements are taking place. Students are organizing into effective pressure groups to urge their demands for greater freedom and individual rights. Or they are joining with dissatisfied teachers to form new schools or to propose alternative experiments within the existing system. I know of one group of fifty students in a Connecticut High School who have spent the entire year planning in minute detail an experimental school within a school, a free and open educational scheme designed to exist in the same building and at the same time as a traditional high school. They've anticipated most of the objections and worked

*From THE SOFT REVOLUTION by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner. Copyright (c) 1971 by Neil Postman and Charles Weingartner. Reprinted by Permission of the publisher, Delacorte Press.

to counter them. They've assembled letters from college admissions officers stating that colleges would, indeed, accept students from such a school; they've researched state department of education requirements; they've obtained the endorsement of several teachers; they've even come to a university school of education seeking advice — I mean how establishment oriented can you get? And most important, while they haven't won, they haven't quit. They will be back for another crack at it next year.

But the schools have not been totally deaf to student cries. We have made some attempts to make the curriculum more responsive to individual demands. Among English teachers one of the more popular movements has been the establishment of elective programs. This trend is both full of promise and fraught with danger. On the one hand it can represent a significant first step toward a truly individualized, open, responsive curriculum. On the other hand, it has the potential for leading us back to the compartmentalization and fragmentation of the early sixties when rigor was the thing — and mortis the near result.

At its very worst a system of electives is nothing more than the hacking up of the traditional curriculum, pumping each of the divided segments full of even more trivia, and offering the inflated pieces as half-year "in-depth" courses. Thus, in his senior — or possibly junior — year the student may select from among such courses as: The Short Story, Development of the Drama, Modern Poetry, Shakespeare, The Romantic Period, Advanced Writing — or, if he happens to be lucky enough to be branded a slow learner — Mass Communication or Popular Literature. (Lest anyone here feel under personal attack, let me say I took that list of courses from a school in a large mid-western city where I did some consulting a few weeks ago.) This approach reminds me of the ploy used by some publishers when paperbacks first gained popularity a few years back. Some of you probably remember the new "exciting" paperback series which turned out to be nothing more than the old anthology — neatly quartered (if not drawn) and bound, word-for-word in paper covers. So with electives. If all we change is the packaging and not the contents, why bother at all?

I have found that in many cases the tradition-bound elective program results less from a lack of sensitivity or responsiveness on the part of the teachers who devise it, than from their tendency to ask the wrong people the wrong questions. Typically, an English Department that decides to institute an elective program begins by surveying the department members, asking them what courses

they would like to teach if such a program were initiated. This is the first mistake, because the question, while seemingly democratic and open-ended is really quite limiting. English teachers, being human and the products of their own education, tend to think of courses in terms of the only elective system they know — the one offered to them in college. Thus, they almost always come up with a list of possible electives that bears a striking resemblance to the entries in a college catalogue — literature sliced up by period or author or genre, and a course or two in composition or creative writing. Then these lists are distributed to the student body, and the kids are asked to indicate which courses they would elect, were they given the chance. Again, the question is too narrow. Most kids are also locked into traditional ways of thinking about English, and they tend to make their choices on the basis of their recollection of those parts of standard English classes which they most enjoyed (or disliked least) or in terms of what they have come to believe they ought to know if they are to succeed in college or "The Real World." The end result is a lot of picking and choosing, a lot of tabulating, and a final list that represents reshuffling rather than real change.

A much better approach, one that I have seen used successfully, is to ask both the teachers and the kids the same question — what problems or issues would you like to explore without regard to any limits of subject matter or traditional academic disciplines? Then match the kids' lists with the teachers' and, lo and behold, all sorts of "courses" become apparent.

Let me read you the titles of just a few that emerged from such an approach used by a school in Virginia. These are quarter courses, roughly nine weeks in length, and available to juniors and seniors: "The Limits of Love" (*Of Mice and Men*, *As You Like It*, film of the play *Symphony Pastorale* by Gide, *Madame Butterfly*, various poems, stories, songs, etc. — these materials are merely suggestions for teachers and students — not requirements), "Witchcraft and Devilry"; "The Forgotten American (Indian)"; "Others"; "Why Have All The Flowers Gone?"; "What's Happening"; "Comedy Of Confusion"; "Love Is . . ."; "No Safety In Numbers"; "The Negative Utopia". These are just a few chosen at random. All told there are about 100 such courses from which to choose, including independent study for the student who doesn't like any of them, and each student chooses four each year.

Of course there are problems with scheduling, distribution of students, etc., and not every student is able to get his first choice, but at least the choice is real, and both the students and the teachers

feel the content is worthwhile. More important, it is a movement toward the ultimate elective program — as many "courses" as there are students. A dream beyond our resources and administrative imagination at present? Perhaps, but the only dream worth aiming at.

Or maybe it isn't an impossible dream. Many people seem to think we can bring it to reality right now — particularly our cousins in England. Since 1966 the name Dartmouth has taken on increasing significance for English teachers (and not just because it is the home base of Jack Ragle). It has come to symbolize a new infusion of concern for the learner in the teaching of English, a deemphasis of preoccupation with the structure of the discipline and a mounting interest in the structure of the kid. A focus on language in use and the uses of language and a turning away from classification and identification and accumulation of knowledge about. And the primary reason the English were able to bring this viewpoint to the Dartmouth Conference was the experience and confidence they had gained from the experimentation and innovation in their primary schools.

The British, long before Charles Silberman, concluded that most education was a grim and joyless experience, and they decided to do something about it. With their typical pragmatic logic, they chose to begin at the beginning, to make sweeping reforms in the early years of schooling. The major characteristics of that reform, or really the major characteristics of the English Primary School as it operates today, are outlined in the briefing papers you've been given, and I won't attempt to repeat them here. Many of you are probably familiar with them anyway.

Instead, as one who has visited numerous infant and junior schools in England, come to know many classroom teachers there, and watched the training of teachers for these schools, let me merely add a few simple observations.

British Primary Education — The Open Day, The Integrated Day, or whatever you want to call it — works. And it works well. However, it's not the final answer; it has its weaknesses and problems. And the teachers are aware of these and working to solve them. But it is a giant step in the right direction. I have tried many times to explain the British approach to American teachers, and I've seldom been successful. Usually, those who are romantics, or at least romantically inclined, understand. But those who believe firmly in the American approach tend to think I'm exaggerating the degree of success the British achieve. But I have encountered few Americans who have seen these schools in action who have not come away believers, or at the very least doubters of their own preconceptions.

This is why, at the University of Connecticut, we are making such a concerted effort to get as many of our students and faculty as possible to spend some time in English Primary School classrooms.

Let me try to clarify one common misconception that many American teachers seem to have. Education in these classrooms is *not* totally permissive, unstructured, and purposeless. It is individualized, open, and student centered, but the teacher is very much a presence in the room — guiding, suggesting, encouraging, helping — but seldom demanding. The structure of the class, or more accurately the structure of the learning experience, is not worked out in detail in advance by the teacher. Rather the teacher perceives the potential structure in the activity of the pupil and helps him to discover it. It is a hard distinction to verbalize, but it is a distinction that makes all the difference.

Another basic difference is that the English feel that there are certain characteristics, such as the acquisition of an esthetic sense, that require a lifetime to develop, and that there are certain skills, such as reading and mathematics, that can be learned very quickly when the need arises. Thus in the early years they devote a great deal of time to artistic and creative activity and worry very little about the mastery of skills. And, again on the basis of personal observation, I could not see that the basic skills suffered very much.

Whether or not we can modify our production line concept of education sufficiently to make the British system work here is a real question. Certainly, it becomes increasingly difficult at a time when accountability seems to be becoming a national catchword.

Make no mistake about it, the concept of accountability is with us and seems destined to stay for a while. Those of you who have not been touched by it already can consider yourselves very fortunate if you get through the coming year unscathed. A few weeks ago Sidney Marland, United States Commissioner of Education, spoke on our campus and reaffirmed the commitment of the United States Office of Education to this principle. He *was* encouraging enough to suggest that at least he, personally, had doubts as to whether our current ability to test was sufficiently sophisticated to measure all those things we attempt to teach, particularly in the Humanities.

To try to give a detailed picture of issues as complex as behavioral objectives, performance contracting, and the concept of accountability in a few minutes would be foolish. I refer you instead to the items and questions on your briefing sheets, to the note booklet *On Writing Behavioral Objectives*, to Robert

Mager's *Preparing Instructional Objectives*, and to the articles by Edmund Farrell and Dan Lindley in the last issue of the *Leaflet*. These will give you an idea of what the movement is all about, how it works, and what some of the objectives are. However, I'm sure most of you are already aware of the questions at issue, and on that assumption I'd like to add a few personal words to the debate.

I agree that the schools should be accountable for what they do, but the real questions are accountable to whom? For what? In what manner? And when? I agree that a sense of direction and purpose is an important part of the learning process; however, I reject the notion that it is a necessary requisite to learning. We've all learned too many valuable things we never intended to learn in ways we never anticipated. However, purpose should be central to what goes on in schools. In fact, the quest for purpose may be the only defensible argument for the continued existence of schools. It could well be that the only justification for school buildings in the 1970's is that they provide a place to gather the young and help them make sense out of all the things they are learning elsewhere. But I reject the notion that the only legitimate sense of purpose is the teachers', or the performance contractors', or the USOE's, or even society's. The kid's sense of purpose, of what is worth doing and knowing, of what it means to grow and become, is equally — if not more — legitimate.

And this is why I reject all behavioral objectives save those mutually arrived at and agreed upon by student and teacher. A sensitive, compassionate teacher *can* help a student formulate important goals, to find a purpose in his learning, in ways that are forever closed to the systems of RCA or General Electric. I reject the whole systems approach as being based on a false analogy. I will go so far as to say that one of the most potentially dangerous statements of our time, ranking right along with "Power To The People," "If You're Not Part Of The Solution You're Part Of The Problem," or "America, Love It Or Leave It," is any sentence beginning with the words "If we can put a man on the moon, then we can _____ ." Fill in the blank with almost any social problem, and you've got a dangerous statement because it attributes to the systems approach almost mystical powers, powers that can be applied only through disregard for individual worth and choice.

Finally, like Ed Farrell, I seriously question how long the students who are lashing out at the prescribed curricula in today's schools will tolerate even more rigid curricula based on objectives they perceive as trivial.

But, in spite of all these rejections and doubts and questions, I

still believe we should understand this movement toward accountability, understand the thinking of the behavioralists, understand the methods of the performance contractors, first so that we can cope with them, and second, because they may, after all, have some things to tell us that will help us be more effective teachers.

Consider in the context of what I have said thus far the task of preparing an English teacher to enter today's classrooms. It represents a challenge of staggering proportions. And consider how our colleges and universities have responded to this challenge. With a bow to the systems people, I would venture to say that if the same minds that devised our teacher preparation programs had devised our space program, Cape Kennedy would today be the site of the world's largest sling shot. There have been few, if any, real changes in college and university offerings — in either English or Education courses — for the past forty years. A few credits more or less, a course or two added or subtracted. Through wars, economic and social upheavals, changing mores, and the most dramatic technological advances in human history, the training of English teachers has remained fixed and sure.

The prospective teacher is walked through a series of English courses (translate "Literature Courses") learning time and again that literature is something esoteric, complex, yielding grudgingly only to a concerted critical onslaught. Books become the property of the cognoscente, those insiders who know how to interpret the symbols and unscramble the metaphors. Personal response, if it is ever considered at all, is an afterthought, an optional extra. You all know how difficult and frustrating it is to explain a joke to someone who didn't get it the first time. Yet for years our college English departments have been turning out teachers who are professional explainers of jokes, who approach literature with the attitude that they have to *tell* students what to feel and how to feel, and what it *really* means.

At the same time our colleges and departments of education continue to offer courses which are ill-conceived, ill-timed, and ill-taught models of hypocrisy. Lectures on the joys of the open classroom, prepared syllabi in which the last of a sequence of assigned topics is "pupil-teacher planning," mock lesson plans built on hypothetical situations constituting little more than exercises in outlining. The spectacle of professors of education failing to practice what they preach has been a long standing collegiate joke enjoyed by both students and faculty. But it is no longer funny. We can no longer accept a situation on our campuses in which better teaching is done by the football coach than by the professors of education.

Teacher preparation must be moved from college classrooms to school classrooms. We must stop talking *about* and *do*. We must rid ourselves of the notion that the ability to earn an "A" on a paper and pencil examination in educational theory indicates anything more than the ability to read and listen well. We must effect closer ties between the colleges and the schools and utilize the talents of outstanding classroom teachers, not merely as occasional supervisors of student teachers, but as integral members of our teacher preparation programs.

In many places this movement is already underway. I think we've taken a long step in this direction at the University of Connecticut. But we've got a long way to go. And we need the active support and help of classroom teachers and organizations like the NEATE to open up the way for real progress.

But what about the teacher surplus? What's the point of preparing more and better teachers if there aren't any jobs for them? These are questions I am faced with every day, and I must admit the situation poses something of a dilemma. The students coming to us these days are brighter, more concerned, and more committed to teaching as a career than ever before. The overwhelming majority belong in classrooms, would make excellent teachers. How do I turn them away? But if they can't get jobs (and it looks as if about half of this year's graduates will not), what will they do? Where will they go? Will they be lost to teaching forever?

Ideally, the schools should be welcoming them, using this plethora of talent to reduce class size, institute new programs, develop new approaches. Instead, the opposite is happening. Everywhere, schools are increasing the load of English teachers. The hard-won four-class per teacher schedule is fast disappearing, at least in Connecticut, and class sizes will be larger next year. Elective programs only a year or two old are being dropped or curtailed in favor of standardized classes and mass education. The universal cries are "austerity," "cut back," "not now." How ripe a time for a performance contractor to make his pitch to a desperate board of education — "We promise results, or you don't have to pay."

But there is another facet to the problem of teacher surplus. Boards of education and legislatures are looking at those masses of bright, eager, and unemployed young teachers and asking "Why must we keep good, new ones out while we are forced to keep the barely adequate in?" It is likely that tenure laws will come under fire during the coming year with an intensity we have not seen in a long time. And we are already seeing a sharp rise in the non-renewal

of contracts for non-tenured teachers.

All of which brings me to the question of teacher militancy — and also just about to the end of my time. However, the question of militancy actually implies asking what we, as individuals and as an organization, can do about these problems I've been discussing, and that is the question you will be wrestling with in the rap sessions to follow. So I'll postpone whatever remarks I want to make on militancy until I hear what you have to say.

Of course it's an impossible task, but then so is teaching English.